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## WHY DO SO MANY PUPILS LEAVE THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL DURING THE FIRST YEAR?<sup>1</sup>

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Teachers as a class are prone to worry, so it may calm us secondary teachers somewhat at the outset to understand that problems of survival are not peculiar to the high school. Geological strata testify to the enormous waste of life. Sudden climatic changes have modified or killed whole species. The cataclysms occurring in the fourth and the ninth grades are not so destructive as many that happen around us in the world of nature. If all the progeny of one pair of gypsy moths survived, they might in eight years devour all the earth's vegetation. Nature has seemed to take delight in producing in enormous quantities, so that individuals would encounter a desperate competitive conflict from which only the strongest could emerge.

The high school has recently suffered overmuch blame. Doubtful statistics have been employed to cover it with odium. The high school has received as much blame for failing to graduate all the pupils who never enter its doors as for its failure to graduate all who enter its first year. I think that figures will show that secondary schools do their work as well as any other department of education. In 1894 the state superintendent of Ohio said that 50 per cent. of all enrolled pupils dropped out by the end of the fourth school year. Kansas City has excellent progressive schools, and yet in 1904 her superintendent said: "It is safe to assume that 50 per cent. of the pupils enrolled in the public schools of Kansas City never get beyond the fourth year's work." It is an appalling fact if 50 per cent. of the school children of a republic whose watchword is "education" do not get beyond the fourth grade. This whole nation ought to rise and discover the reason for this condition.

Great universities have their own shortcomings. I do not believe

<sup>1</sup> Paper read before the Department of Secondary Education at the meeting of the National Educational Association, July 4, 1905.

that the high school can be charged with allowing its pupils to waste their time in as pronounced a degree as students do at some colleges. Professor Byerly, of Harvard, says in the *Harvard Graduates' Magazine* for December, 1902:

It is commonly, and I believe correctly, asserted that a student of fair ability, entering college from a good preparatory school, choosing his studies with discretion, using borrowed or purchased lecture notes, and attending one or two lecture "seminars" for a couple of evenings before the mid-year and final examinations, can win our A.B. degree without spending more than half an hour a day in serious study outside of the lecture and examination rooms.

The Tower of Siloam has for some time been falling on the high school, but I hope that I have made you feel that we are not worse than some on whom that tower has not yet fallen. If I have, I am perfectly willing to admit the faults of secondary education, and to ask you to buckle on your armor to overcome them. No matter how wasteful nature is, it is our duty to try to make two blades of grass grow in the high school where one has grown before.

In any city, however healthful, some are certain to die each year. If the death-rate is too high, a good board of health will make inquiries and devise remedies. What is the percentage of that special type of high-school mortality which we are discussing? The answers are nearly as various as the schools. The assistant commissioner of education of the state of New York said in 1904 of the high schools of New York city: "Approximately 52 per cent. are enrolled in first-year classes; 26 in the second; 13 in the third; and 7 in the fourth."<sup>1</sup> As a result of his quite extensive studies, Professor A. C. Ellis says: "Of the boys entering the high school nearly half drop out before the second year in all sections of the country."<sup>2</sup>

There is general agreement that the percentage of those falling by the way in the first year of the high school exceeds that for any other year. What are the causes? The statistical method has been tried to answer the question definitely, but those who have tried this way acknowledge its failure.<sup>3</sup> Secondary education is in such a transitional state, and the teachers change so frequently, that figures

<sup>1</sup> *Educational Review*, October, 1904.

<sup>2</sup> N. E. A. *Proceedings*, 1903, p. 794.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Greenwood, "Report on High School Statistics," N. E. A. *Proceedings*, 1900, p. 340.

from the same school for different years are often worthless for purposes of comparison.

Mr. William F. Book<sup>1</sup> adopted a more suggestive method than the statistical in finding out why high-school pupils leave school. He had 961 high-school boys and girls in fifteen different cities and towns discuss this question in writing, so as to get the pupils' point of view. Many of the replies show remarkably good sense and penetration. Many different reasons are given, but there are some points in which all the papers agree. These common points of agreement are that pupils leave the high school because their interest is not secured; because the teachers fail to give them proper help and encouragement, or are positively unsympathetic; or because, from a plain business point of view, going to high school does not pay. Three extracts from what the pupils wrote will be suggestive. One says: "Many a boy stops rather than be tormented by a teacher who fails to understand him." Another exclaims: "Nothing doing in school!" A boy of seventeen writes: "I attribute most of the interest I have taken in any subject to the teacher in that branch."

I should like to offer some suggestions based on my secondary-school experience extending through twenty years. I remember that the mortality in a certain hospital once resulted in an investigation. The committee reported that the causes were two: young and inexperienced doctors unscientifically treating an unusual epidemic of a virulent disease. I believe that this same verdict will account for much of the excessive mortality of the first year in the high school. High-school teaching is not yet a profession, and the first year develops an unusually virulent disease in the pupil.

High-school teaching is not a profession in the same sense as the practice of law and medicine. Professor Dexter,<sup>2</sup> from his study of a selected group of high schools, gives the average years' experience of high-school teachers as varying from 8.9 for men in the North Atlantic Division of states, to 4.4 for women in the Western Division. Superintendent Aiton, state inspector of high schools of Minnesota, writes: "In my judgment, the average term of service of the high-

<sup>1</sup> "Why Pupils Drop out of the High School," *Pedagogical Seminary*, June, 1904.

<sup>2</sup> *Fourth Yearbook* of the National Society for the Scientific Study of Education, Part I, p. 52.

school teacher in this state is not over four years." If I am reminded that many drop out of medicine and law, I must ask: Are the best lawyers and the best doctors the ones most likely to abandon their professions? Do our most intelligent young men and women remain in teaching? In twenty years I have never known but one high-school teacher, whose resignation was desired, to present it voluntarily. If the most capable young men and women do not find enough in secondary teaching to attract them permanently, it is plain that our high schools can never reach high-water mark. The high school of which I am principal pays from \$1,000 to \$1,800, but I am never satisfied with that worth of ability in my teachers. I usually get men who are worth vastly more; but, as a rule, they leave in a short time. This ceaseless change, this increasing difficulty of finding suitable men teachers to inspire adolescent boys, and of avoiding incompetents who would mar God's image in the making, causes me often to say: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a secondary crown."

Authorities tell us that less than 20 per cent. of the boys who enter high schools remain to graduate. The Boys' High School of Louisville has for some years maintained an average of nearly 38 per cent. of graduates. This would not be a large average for a girls' school, or for a mixed school, or for a school in a smaller town where the population is more homogeneous and the chance for social mingling greater; but I am sure that this percentage could not have been maintained in a commercial city of a quarter of a million, unless the remedies, which I shall now briefly outline, had been prescribed to stop withdrawals from school.

First, an endeavor is made to get the best teachers, irrespective of the state in which they were born or educated. College graduates are always chosen, largely in terms of their individuality, which must be such as to inspire and stimulate adolescents. The adolescent teacher must be of energy, enthusiasm, and sympathy all compact. I have found that inefficient teachers fail the largest proportion of pupils, irrespective of the subject. Those teachers who cause the most to drop out are either those who have little skill in the art of teaching or those of the self-righteous, unsympathetic type, who remain on their pedestals and offer no encouragement to a stumbler.

I sometimes ask such in a roundabout way: "Suppose the Messiah had been of your type?"

Second, put your best teachers in charge of first-year classes, and you will be astonished at the size of your second-year classes.

Third, even the best teachers should remember that the majority of incoming pupils are very immature. If instructors are not careful, they will find themselves teaching subjects like algebra and Latin as if the pupils were expert metaphysicians. I have often sat in the rear of the room and listened to the explanations of the teacher, and failed to comprehend them on the run, because, like the pupil, I was not an expert in that line. At such times there comes over me a feeling of thankfulness that I am no longer a child compelled to grasp at hurried explanations which have no meaning for me. Remembering how I dreaded to be in the clutches of a teacher whose explanations I could not comprehend, I sometimes wonder that more pupils do not leave.

In the fourth place, I should like to emphasize the fact that the first eight weeks in the high school are the most important in the course. The psychological moment has come to endear the pupil to the school, and to put him on such a firm foundation that the floods of discouragement and the winds of bad preparation will not shake him. Never again will he be so impressionable, never again will he slave so willingly, never again will the mere novelty of mastering things hard and dry seem like such a glorious victory. The majority of teachers begin a new subject too rapidly and give the pupils too little time to find themselves. In many cases a third of the class is so far behind at the end of eight weeks that their doom is already sealed. A horse- or a dog-trainer who failed with such a large percentage of animals would be speedily asked to change his occupation.

Every enduring element of human progress is built on repetition. Those teachers are geniuses who can have the pupil repeat foundation facts in such a variety of settings that he never feels the mental paralysis that comes from too much sameness, but seems to be getting something new with each recitation, just as a skilful cook can make you and me think that we have a varied bill-of-fare, although the essential articles of diet have been the same for a month.

In the fifth place, high-school teachers must be able to teach pupils how to study. That is one of the most important parts of our business. All teachers are too prone to forget that the study of books, however necessary, is at first unnatural. The first year in the high school suddenly presents subjects from a more difficult and abstruse point of view, and book-study becomes correspondingly more unnatural. For untold ages man's chief business was with external things, with rain and shelter and fruits and animals and clothing. He cared little for the idea divorced from the thing. They went hand in hand. In the study of algebra and Latin, for instance, how could this unnatural divorce be more complete?

The complaint is universal that high-school pupils do not know how to study. How many high-school teachers really know how to break pupils into dealing with ideas apart from things? Many pupils are simply bewildered when left alone with ideas. They do not know what such study means. It is simply mockery to tell them to concentrate their minds, and not to think of the dog, or the boy whistling to them to come outside. I have found out, by costly experience, that many pupils will never learn how to study unless their minds are steadied by some objective external aid. They need that just as much as a carpenter requires a scaffolding. For instance, a pupil who did not have the power of putting much consecutive study on his Latin forms was handed a lead pencil and a piece of paper, and told to write down the forms. The movement of the pencil and the black marks appealed to his bodily eye and furnished the requisite external scaffolding to keep his mind steady. Then he was told to repeat the words aloud, and his ear afforded a different type of scaffolding. Some pupils need to represent their algebraic problems graphically before they mean anything. One beginning class which had done execrable work in English composition was made to follow a rag-picker for half an hour; or to spend the same length of time watching a street fakir, or a policeman, or a dog, or a cat, or a freight depot, or a central market, or a peddling huckster, or something else that afforded scope for mental action in connection with things or movements. The pupils were then required to report what they had seen or done. The improvement was so rapid that the whole school was then given regular assignments, just the same

as if all the pupils had been reporters on a daily paper. The improvement in writing was so striking that this output was exhibited at St. Louis, and was one of the factors in securing an individual gold medal for the school.

In the next place, my experience has convinced me that first-year pupils should receive special attention the moment signs of delinquency begin to appear. This attention, which can be given before or after school or during study periods, is as absolutely necessary for delinquents as for a physically sick person to have a doctor. I know that this special attention will save many from leaving school.

Let me tell you how certain altruistic teachers carried a class of twenty-eight boys through the first year with a loss of only two. The class was merely an average one in point of ability. One special teacher adopted that class. He told the class that he should consider them his boys, that he was responsible for them, and that he had already boasted that they would stand by him and do well. He asked them to let him know personally if any trouble developed. From the start the class was interested in keeping his good opinion; but soon there began to be copying, that almost invariable precursor of delinquency, and then some boys fell behind. He said to them: "Boys, this class is like a city or a town, and you must help each other out. If one boy fails and stays a failure, I am going to hold the entire class responsible. What would you think of a city that had no infirmary or hospital, and paid no attention to its sick? You must yourselves help all your classmates who need assistance in any study, but you must help them right here in the class family with me, and not on the outside, unless I first have an understanding with you about that. You won't find it necessary to copy any more." Then, to break the ice, he had boys begin to help each other at once. A number who had been sent to the board to work algebra problems could not solve them, and he promptly sent other boys there to help them in such a way that they could work the problem alone. Others were detailed to go around the room to find out if more needed help, and the helpers were very proud to be designated as such.

Their patron teacher regularly visited all their other instructors, to ascertain if there were delinquencies in other subjects, and to see that the needed attention was at once given. That class became

patriotic to a fault. It was proud of itself, its teachers, and the entire school. About a month before the end of the year, I was detained an hour after closing time. As I left, I was surprised to see two boys from that class coming from a room. "Sam," I said, "you and Will must have been very naughty to be kept so long after school." "No," replied Will, "Sam didn't understand his German very well, and I just stayed to help him."

We saved all but two of that class of twenty-eight. And every one of those twenty-six boys would have behaved like a Tartar at home, if anyone had suggested his stopping at the end of the year.

We never have such success with those classes whose teachers we change in the middle of the year. It takes both pupils and teachers some months to adapt themselves to each other. To make a change when they really begin to understand each other results in much wasted force. If mid-year promotions necessitate tearing up the school in the middle of the year, then I doubt their wisdom. I have seen classes that had done good work the first half of the year go completely to pieces under a change of teachers the second half.

We have found out through experience that the work of the first year should not be so severe as that of the other years. We make it 20 per cent. less in amount. But whatever is taught should be thoroughly taught. A pupil will never amount to much unless he learns how to face hard work. Mr. Book's investigations show that no teacher who was lenient or easy in her requirements was mentioned by the pupils as a favorite instructor. His comment is: "All said that they did as much work for their favorite teacher as for all the other teachers combined, and that it was always a pleasure to do it."

Now, I shall try to epitomize, as briefly as I can, the points which seem most important in discussing withdrawals from the high school. I believe that for lasting, orderly improvement, high-school teaching must become a profession; that adolescent teachers must be chosen largely in terms of their personality, with the chief emphasis on sympathy and the power to stimulate and inspire; that these teachers should understand the break between the eighth and ninth grades is due more to an emphatic difference in the kind and amount of mental activity required in the high school than to mere difference in the subject-matter; that they should realize how unnatural is the

study of abstract ideas and relations; that they must learn the absolutely necessary art of teaching pupils how to study; that first-year classes should be put in charge of the very best teachers; that the first eight weeks are the most important; that the start in new studies must not be made too rapid; that delinquents must immediately receive special attention; that some one teacher should watch a special class like a parent, and that he should receive special credit for having as few delinquents as possible, as should every teacher for keeping down the number of delinquents in his special branch; that a spirit of co-operation should be developed, so that the members of each class will be willing to help their own delinquents under the direction of the teacher; that classes should change their teachers as little as possible during the year; that the work of the first year should be very thorough, but about 20 per cent. less in amount than for the other years; that good teaching and the spirit of the school are more important to prevent withdrawals than the addition of many so-called popular subjects; that the enrichment of the course may not result in the enrichment of the pupils; that, to a certain extent, different causes are operative in leading the two sexes to stop school, the boys seldom mentioning ill-health or overwork; that more attention should be paid to differentiation in secondary instruction for the two sexes, the reason for this belief not being based on introspection, but on the concurring testimony of experienced secondary teachers coming to the Louisville Boys' High School from schools where the female sex preponderated, that, in spite of much previous successful experience, it took them at least a year to learn how to handle boys properly; that the school should foster some branches of social activity appealing to the play or recreation side of the most varied personalities; and, finally and chiefly, that teachers should aim to develop moral stamina, since more pupils drop out from lack of moral vigor than from deficient intellectual ability.